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# THE OLD <sup>AND</sup><sub>THE</sub> NEW IDEAL <sup>OF</sup> SCHOLARS

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A BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS DELIVERED

JUNE 18, 1905,

BY JAMES BURRILL ANGELL, LL.D.,

PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

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# THE OLD AND THE NEW IDEAL OF SCHOLARS

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## BACCALAUREATE DISCOURSE

DELIVERED JUNE 18 BY PRESIDENT ANGELL

During the last half century an important change has taken place in the intellectual ideals which students in American colleges and universities are taught to cherish. In my college days we were incited to make the largest possible acquisitions of what had been learned and thought by great scholars and to attain the culture which such achievement brought us. In these days the ultimate end which the student is exhorted to seek over and above and beyond those acquisitions is the power and the passion for discovering new truth. Learning and culture were the rewards for which we then strove. In addition to them the scholar is now exhorted and stimulated to test his gifts for investigation and research in some department of thought. No ambitious young teacher in our colleges now fails to make a strenuous effort to enlarge, if possible, the boundaries of knowledge in the domain of learning which he is called to cultivate. The enthusiasm of the teachers is easily communicated to their aspiring pupils. Therefore many of the most brilliant and promising students who have reached the stage to which you have come are fired with the purpose and familiar to some degree with the methods of seizing any opportunity for intelligent and fruitful research. One of the obvious consequences of this difference be-

tween the graduate of former days and the graduate of to-day is that the former was inclined to accept with more docility the opinions which had been taught to him, while the latter is apt to have more independence of view and often more originality. The former is more disposed to accept the authority of tradition, the latter to question every belief which asks for his assent until it is proved to be sound.

Each type of scholarship, the old and the new, has some advantages and some dangers.

The advantages gained by each of the methods of study described are obvious enough. He who has gained possession of the great thoughts, the polished languages, the rich literatures, the fruitful history of the past, has a store of intellectual wealth on which he can draw to aid him in every exigency of life. Lofty and elevating ideals of literary form, of scientific exposition, of human achievement, of manly and womanly character are ever before his mind. They stimulate him to imitation, to intellectual activity, to heroic living. The roll of great men who have been nurtured and inspired by the mastery of learning is long and distinguished. We cannot honor them too highly.

On the other hand the men who have made their aim not only to acquire a knowledge of the truth handed down to them, but have sought to learn how to discover new truth, have peculiarly developed their perceptive and reasoning faculties and have often enlarged the domain of our knowledge by pains-taking research. They are classed with the great discoverers. They have made known to us the mysteries of the divine handiwork, and have wrung from nature the answers to our eager and irrepressible questionings about the origin and development of man and of the world in which he finds himself.

Among the perils of the old type are the following:

1. By the too docile acceptance of the traditions, tastes and doctrines of the past there is danger of the perpetuation of error, of acquiescence in false views of



history, character and life. Immeasurable indeed is the debt we owe to the past for the truth it has handed down to us. But mingled with the precious freightage of truth which it has brought, is no small quantity of misrepresentations, delusions, and falsehoods, which it behooves us to beware of. We cannot afford to take blindly all that it offers us.

2. The scholar who contents himself with absorbing, with voracious appetite and unquestioning readiness, all the learning that his predecessors have passed on to him may have an intellectual plethora that will cripple him with the feebleness and sourness of mental dyspepsia rather than furnish him with mental vigor. Some men are weighed down with such a superfluity of learning that it is not only useless to them, but positively cumbersome. There are juvenile phenomena crammed and stuffed with text-book knowledge as geese are fattened for the market by over-feeding, and neither the children nor the geese have the power of useful activity.

3. There are men who by temperament are inclined to worship the old, merely because it is old. Whatever the fathers have said is admired by them, because the fathers have said it. Whatever the fathers have held, is accepted by them, because the fathers have held it. Imitation of the fathers is to them the truest wisdom. Like the Chinese, they see their golden age behind them, not before them. So far as they can, they anchor the human race to the past, and make progress impossible.

These three perils impend over the scholar whose ideal is merely to master the learning of the past.

On the other hand the student who undervalues the intellectual contributions of the past and who trusts unduly to his own power of investigation often loses the valuable fruits of the toil of his predecessors by his ignorance of their discoveries or by his lack of appreciation of them. How many men have there been of great talent, but of limited scholarship, who have worked for years to reach a result which had been attained long

before by some one as gifted as they. But for their ignorance they might have started their search where they left off, and pushed on their search beyond the frontiers of the known. The first quest of the successful investigator should be to learn all that others in any land or in any century have ascertained concerning the subject in hand. With that at his command he can then press forward into the domain of the unknown, and recognize as genuine any real treasures which he may find.

2. Another danger to which a seeker after truth is exposed, if he is not well read in the literature of his subject, is vanity over his supposed discoveries, when they may prove not to be new discoveries at all. It is not rare to meet men of this stamp, possessed it may be of vigorous minds, but absurdly over-confident in the value of their work, and disposed to discourse with flippancy and conceit of it, and to be quite impatient and incensed at hearing it estimated at its real worth by one whose learning qualifies him to make a just appraisal of it. They are apt to be among the most dogmatic and bigoted of men.

3. Again as we found men worshipping the old merely because it was old, so we find the men of whom we are speaking disposed to worship the new merely because it is new. They spurn the conservatism, limitations and ignorance of the elder generations. They do not imagine that in their enlightened age they can learn from their ancestors. Their own witty inventions must needs be better than any superannuated contrivances of the past. They may magnanimously admit that their elders did fairly well for their times, but the brighter light of our day makes their work superfluous. So these fail to learn much that can often be learned by patiently tracing the steps through which the fathers brought us along to the high vantage ground on which we now stand. They are liable to be at once enamored of any novelty that a plausible charlatan may display.

To these perils thus briefly set forth the votaries of

literature and of science are alike exposed.

In comparing the method of the present and that of the past generation in determining their attitude towards the Christian faith, we find a change analogous to that which we have recognized in their intellectual activity. And this was to be expected. It is impossible that their mental processes in respect to all the other subjects of thought should be modified without affecting their thought and reasoning concerning religion. Formerly they accepted for the most part without questioning the views which had been held concerning the Bible, concerning inspiration, and with some differences in different groups concerning theological doctrines. They raised no question about the canonicity or authority of the various books of the Scripture. They generally received their beliefs as they did their names, as a family inheritance. The only question was, whether they would or would not comply with what they conceded, if pressed for a statement, was the demand which was made upon them by the Scripture as their rule of life, and the Scripture as generally interpreted in their circle of associates.

But those who were of scholarly temperament feasted their souls and their minds on the meditations, the experiences, the reasonings of the great men in the church through all the centuries of the Christian era. The leaders in theological exposition from St. Paul to Luther and Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, the revealers of deep spiritual experience from St. John to St. Francis and Thomas à Kempis, the decisions and creeds of councils from Nicaea to Westminster, the suffering of martyrs from St. Stephen to modern missionaries, that most remarkable of all historic growths, the growth of the Christian church, these all have been devoutly studied by them until the life of that church has become incorporated into their lives, and they are an integral part of it. They are linked to the past by the strong and holy ties of an invincible faith, which is an anchor to the soul, sure and steadfast. But it may be and often is so

bound to the traditions of the past that it admits of little or no modification by virtue of any new light from modern discovery in any department of scholarship.

And in the last generation in no department of human thought has there been greater or more important activity than in religious thought, and in none have the consequences been more marked. Of course there are some men who have not quitted the ground occupied by the fathers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But the great body of scholars have now accepted the doctrine of evolution with all that it implies concerning the origin and development of the physical world and of man. Exactly what it does imply in some particulars, is indeed still a matter of discussion. But that its implications greatly modify some of our old beliefs, founded on traditional interpretations of the Bible, is certain. Furthermore, careful and critical study of the history, the texts, and the interpretation of the books of the Scripture and also of comparative religions has thrown a flood of light on the meaning of the Scriptures. To the fair and rational mind it has not impaired, but has increased the real value of the ancient books. The church of to-day has a larger and a juster view than the church even of the last century of the Fatherhood of God, of the brotherhood of man, of the long and patient processes by which God in His wisdom has builded the worlds and of the duty of men to regard all others under whatever sky as their brethren whom they are not to plunder and kill, but to aid by all means in their power.

It is research, the search after the truth, both by tracing the footsteps of God in nature, and by Christian exploration after the facts of the development of our religion that has won for us the vantage ground on which we now stand. It is possible, even probable, that further search will correct our present views in some details. But why any honest and intelligent man should discourage and fear the earnest and continuous quest after more truth, it is not easy to see. We need only to bear in

mind that not everything new is true.] We need to treat with proper respect if not all the ideas long held by wise and good men, yet the wise and good men themselves. But with our minds open to fresh light, we must not be bound in slavish servitude to all the beliefs of the past, We ought to know more of some things than the fathers, since so much larger opportunities are afforded to us than they enjoyed.

It must be confessed that with all the zeal of our age for literary and scientific attainments, the average college graduate is far too unfamiliar with that greatest literary treasure of the race, the sacred Scriptures, with the history of the development of religious thought, with the inner life of the Christian church, in short with the power of religion in shaping the career of the race. If you aspire to know the forces that control mankind, especially those that exalt and purify the human heart, you cannot afford to neglect the study of those spiritual forces which have always wielded the greatest power over men. Misunderstood and misused, they have sometimes wrought havoc. But insofar as they have been comprehended and appreciated, they have above all other influences set the race forward towards its true goal. Therefore, whatever else the true scholar neglects, his plain duty and his high privileges are found in striving to find out the ways of God in dealing with men, the exact scope of the truth which he has sought to make known to us and our obligations to our fellowmen.

It may be said that with our multifarious cares in life, even college graduates cannot all be expert scientists or expert Biblical scholars, and so the question may be asked, how can the unlearned with any profit take up this search after religious truth? The answer is simple. The essential element of religious truth is learned and tested by the daily experience even of the humblest. The great Scottish preacher, Chalmers, said that he learned more of such truth from a poor woman living in an obscure lane in Edinburgh than he could pack into his

sermons in a year. Religion in its essence is a life, and every one who tries to live it is constantly studying and illustrating it experimentally. "Then shall ye know, if ye follow on to know the Lord," says the prophet. "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God," says our Lord. Doing is often learning. It is often discovering. So the simplest and humblest soul may by faithful and loving imitation of the example of Him, who said "I am the truth," come to the clear recognition of spiritual truth, which is unperceived by the most acute scholar. Every one of you may be conducting such a research in the course of your daily life.

As we review this brief inspection of two types of scholarship and of two kinds of study, I think we shall agree that a proper combination of them is better than exclusive devotion to either alone. We should make ourselves familiar with the learning of the past not only for its charm, for its inspiring example of the fruits of patient toil, for its masterpieces of genius, but also because it furnishes the foundation on which to build in all our work of research. We lay the foundations of our discoveries on the achievements of the fathers. If they have erred, our success may be due to a perception of their errors, which the fuller light of our time has enabled us to see. We avoid the rocks on which their bark has foundered and so sail out into the open sea and start on a prosperous voyage of discovery. And we must confess that proud as we may be of recent achievements, we can never surpass, probably never equal, some of the great masterpieces of literature which have come down to us from a remote past. It becomes us then to be at once modest and grateful in view of the intellectual wealth which we have inherited, how much soever we may hope to add to it by our own endeavors. Whenever we may take an inventory of our intellectual treasure, we shall find that for far the larger portion of it we are indebted to those who have gone before us and left

us our precious heritage. Compared with the vast accumulation of intellectual wealth which the centuries have handed down to us, our own additions to them for the most part seem petty and insignificant. To appreciate what we have received at its true worth and to use it as capital with which to make our own honest earnings is the part of true wisdom. Thus learning and research go hand in hand to yield us the largest results.

And so in our religious thought and knowledge, after making all due allowance for the illumination which the last half-century has brought to us and rejoicing at the wider horizon of truth which is opening upon us, yet after all the great bulk of our most precious beliefs has come down to us from those four brief and simple narratives, which we call the Gospels, and the most valuable part of our own discoveries consists in finding our way back through mediaeval concealments of them to their fresh and simple instructions, as they fell from the lips of our Lord. "Back to Christ" is the watchword of this age. With all the light which the most profound Biblical and historical learning can throw on his character and career, with reverence for all that the experience and the meditations of the saints have disclosed to us, let us never forget the Master's own rule for finding the truth, namely, in all simplicity and honesty to do His will in the love of it. Therein lies the secret of spiritual research.

I cannot drop this subject, I cannot part with you without reminding you that in the life and character of one, who to our great sorrow has been taken from us this year, we had a most beautiful example of the union in one mind of the passion for learning and the passion for research. In him was the most harmonious combination of love for the great fundamental beliefs of Christianity with the spirit of welcome for every revelation of new truth, whether by scientific investigation or by sound biblical scholarship. Dr. Prescott, the Senior Professor in this University, was an ideal illustration of

the Christian scientific scholar. No child was more modest and humble in his own estimate of his worth. No saint was more firm in his loyalty to his Lord and Master. No scientist was more ardent in research after new scientific truth. No disciple was more convinced that his research was sacred work, and that every discovery that he made of chemical facts or chemical laws was a revelation of the Divine mode of operation. But antecedent to all research no student was more assiduous in learning all that the wisdom of other investigators had to communicate to him as the groundwork for his own quest. Nor was his respect for learning narrow and confined to his own branch of work. In all our University legislation, in shaping which his opinion justly carried great weight, he held the most catholic views about the equal importance of the various branches of study. Long will his influence abide with us. The memory of his many years of conspicuous service and still more of his pure and beautiful character will remain as one of our most precious treasures. May it inspire each one of us to combine in due proportion as he did the old and the new, the culture and research, the most genuine scientific spirit with the sincerest piety, devotion to God and love for his fellow-man.







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